

THE GENUS *SYLVIA* IN KENYA AND UGANDA

D.J. Pearson

INTRODUCTION

This is the first of a series of short accounts in which it is intended to review the status, distribution and wintering of the Palaearctic warblers (Syviidae) in Kenya and Uganda. Our knowledge of Palaearctic passerines in these countries has benefitted greatly from ringing activity and increased observation over the past 15 years. Migration patterns and habitat preferences are now better understood, and more information is available on moult and other activities in winter quarters.

Distributions, as currently established, are mapped on a 1° square grid. For 57 of the 70 mapping squares involved (Fig.1), it has been possible to obtain recent information, based on observation by a reliable observer during the period January to March. For the remaining squares, information has been limited to records in the literature and specimens to be found at the British Museum (Nat. Hist.) and the National Museum Nairobi.

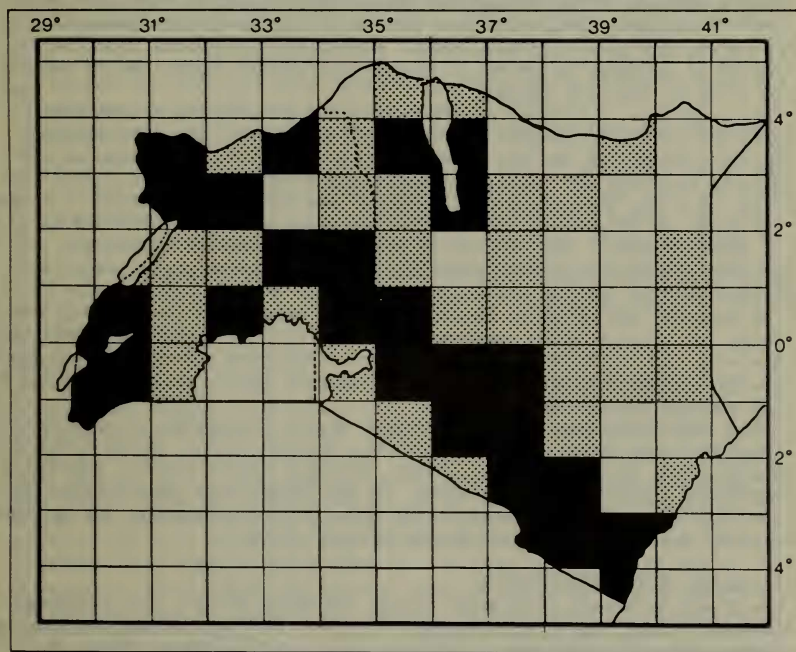


Fig. 1 January-March coverage of 1°-squares for Palaearctic passerines during the period 1964-1978 in Kenya and Uganda

Black: 6 or more mornings' observation by the author and/or one or more of the observers listed under Acknowledgements

Stippled: 1-5 mornings' observations (as defined above)

White: no recent observations (as defined above)

Each species occurring within a square is shown as being either a) scarce, highly localized or known from only a few records, or b) reasonably widespread and not uncommon. An attempt has also been made to distinguish between wintering (perhaps best defined as sojourn in the southernmost African non-breeding area) and passage. The latter category here includes not only transient visitors *en route* to, from or between African non-breeding areas, but also birds sedentary for days or weeks in intermediate African areas north of the ultimate wintering grounds. Wintering in East Africa may be indicated by the presence of steady numbers throughout or towards the end of the period November to March. It is also indicated in some species by moult, and is characterized, in the warblers and nightingales for example, by sedentary behaviour involving territoriality and song. Passerine migrants enter East Africa mainly between October and December, and the majority of birds present to mid-December are probably on passage. In eastern Kenya, heavy movement continues throughout December (Pearson & Backhurst 1976, Backhurst & Pearson 1977) and many passage migrants are present to mid-January. In spring, few species show a passage influx before late March, and territorial singing birds tend to dominate populations to the end of the month. The assumption of wintering has generally been based, therefore, on records from the period 26 December to 20 March (Uganda and western Kenya) or 26 January to 20 March (eastern Kenya).

Four species of *Sylvia*, all Palaearctic visitors, occur commonly in East Africa. These present interesting comparisons. Two, the Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla* and the Garden Warbler *S. borin*, are birds of the moister woodland and forest habitats, and range to high altitudes; the other two, the Whitethroat *S. communis* and the Barred Warbler *S. nisoria*, are birds of drier bush and woodland at lower altitudes confined largely to eastern areas. The members of each pair of species themselves exhibit slightly different distributions and habitat preferences. The Garden Warbler and the Whitethroat winter to a great extent south of the equator, and occur in Kenya and Uganda largely as passage migrants; these two species moult completely in East African winter quarters. The Blackcap and the Barred Warbler, on the other hand, reach southern Africa in small numbers only; they occur in our area mainly as wintering birds, and undergo only a partial moult.

The individual species are discussed below. Statements unsupported by references are based on Jackson (1938), Pearson (1972), Rolfe & Pearson (1973), Fry, Britton & Horne (1974), Hopson & Hopson (1975), Pearson & Backhurst (1976b) and Mann (1976); on the unpublished observations of the author and the observers listed under Acknowledgements, and on dated British Museum and National Museum Nairobi skins.

BLACKCAP *SYLVIA ATRICAPILLA*

The Blackcap breeds throughout Europe (to about 67° N.) and northwest Africa, thence east through Russia (to about 63° N.) to western Siberia and southeast to Asia Minor, the Caucasus and Iran (Voous 1960). It winters mainly in Africa north of the equator, but ranges in small numbers south to eastern Zaïre, Tanzania and Malawi (Moreau 1972). In East Africa it is mainly a wintering bird, confined to higher altitudes. In Uganda (Fig. 2a) it is locally common on Elgon and Ruwenzori at 1800-3000 m and is recorded from the Impenetrable Forest. It is scarce at lower altitudes but has occurred in moist bush or woodland at Kampala, Mokono, Teso,

Kabalega National Park and West Nile. In Kenya it winters widely through the west and central highlands, east to the Chyulus and north to Marsabit, mainly between 1600 and 3000 m, but as high as 3600 m on Mt Kenya. It frequents gardens, woodland, forest edge and even continuous forest, occurring from herbaceous undergrowth to the tops of tall trees.

Arrival is noted mainly at the end of October and early in November. November concentrations sometimes suggest passage, and birds of high weight, presumably bound farther south, have been caught at Nairobi during November and early December. Regular November occurrences at Ngulia (920 m), and November records from Nyanza and Lake Bisina (1000 m) probably involve passage birds. Many birds seem to spend the winter foraging in small parties, usually together with other forest species, and berries certainly form a major part of the diet. Local fluctuations in numbers during winter, and from one year to the next, are presumably related to fruit distribution. Later in winter, however, some individuals do become territorial and establish regular song posts. Song is usually first heard during January or early February, and continues to mid-March, becoming progressively stronger. Spring departure occurs rather abruptly in late March. Birds are rarely recorded after 5 April (latest Nairobi date, 15th), and there is little evidence of passage of birds from farther south. Moults in Africa is partial (Williamson 1964); in Kenya and Uganda the body and head feathers and most of the wing coverts are renewed during January and early February.

Southeastern populations of the Blackcap breeding from the Caucasus to southern Caspian districts, have been recognized as a distinct race *damnholzi*. These birds are paler and greyer above and whiter below than *S. a. atricapilla* from Europe and western Siberia. Kenya highland winterers include both the nominate race and *damnholzi*. The latter has also been reported from Ruwenzori (Vaurie 1959). In view of the European *Zugscheide*, with eastern European and some Scandinavian birds migrating south via the Middle East (see Williamson 1964, Zink 1973), it is possible that nominate birds wintering in East Africa include European as well as Russian breeders.

GARDEN WARBLER *SYLVIA BORIN*

The Garden Warbler, like the Blackcap, breeds from the Atlantic to western Siberia, but ranges farther north in Europe and is absent from the Mediterranean, Asia Minor and Iran (Voous 1960). It winters in Africa from about 8° N. in the west and 3° N. in the east, south to Natal and Damara-land (Moreau 1972). Although it avoids the driest areas, and is practically absent from the coastal strip, it is common and widespread in East Africa on passage, ranging to well over 2000 m. It winters in moist woodland and tall secondary bush in southern Uganda and Nyanza, where it is common near Lake Victoria (Fig. 2b). It also winters from 800 to 1800 m in southern Kenya, from the eastern edge of the highlands at Murang'a and Nairobi east to Kibwezi and Ngulia. Here it tends to utilize drier habitats than in Uganda, but again frequents leafy sites with plenty of thicket and undergrowth. The Garden Warbler and the Blackcap are almost completely separated altitudinally other than at times of passage. They meet in winter only at about 1600 to 1800 m as, for example, on the edge of the central Kenya highlands. In this situation the Blackcap tends to be the bird of higher cover.

The earliest Garden Warblers reach Uganda and Nyanza during late September (once at Entebbe on 5th). Small numbers are then present throughout

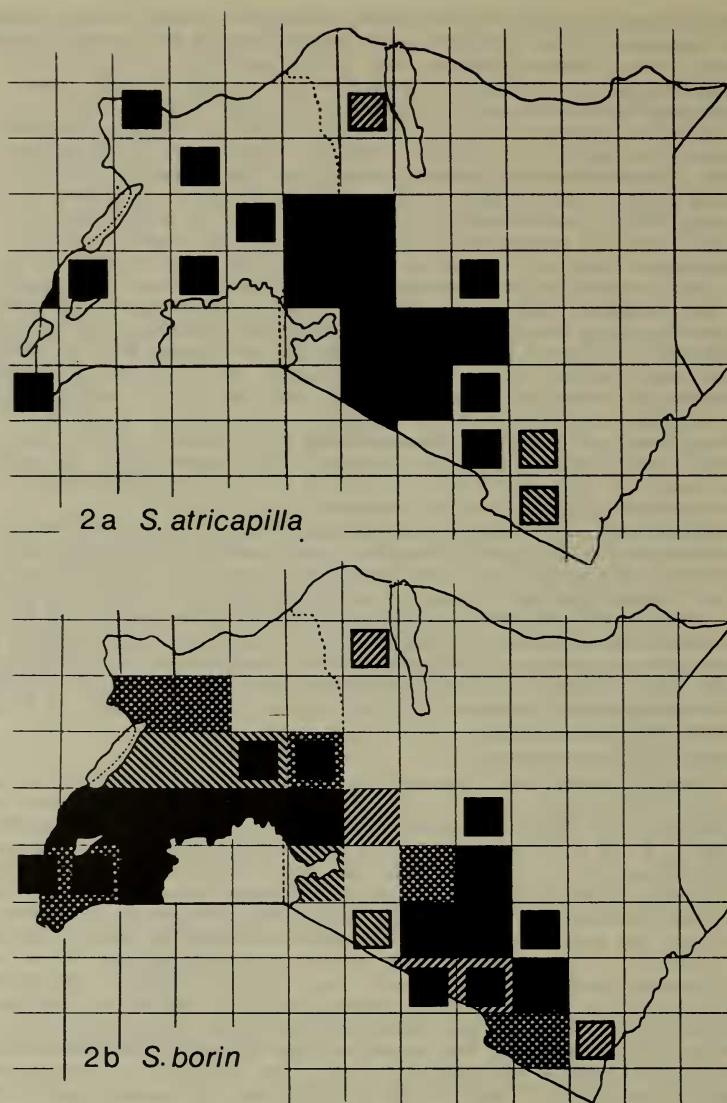
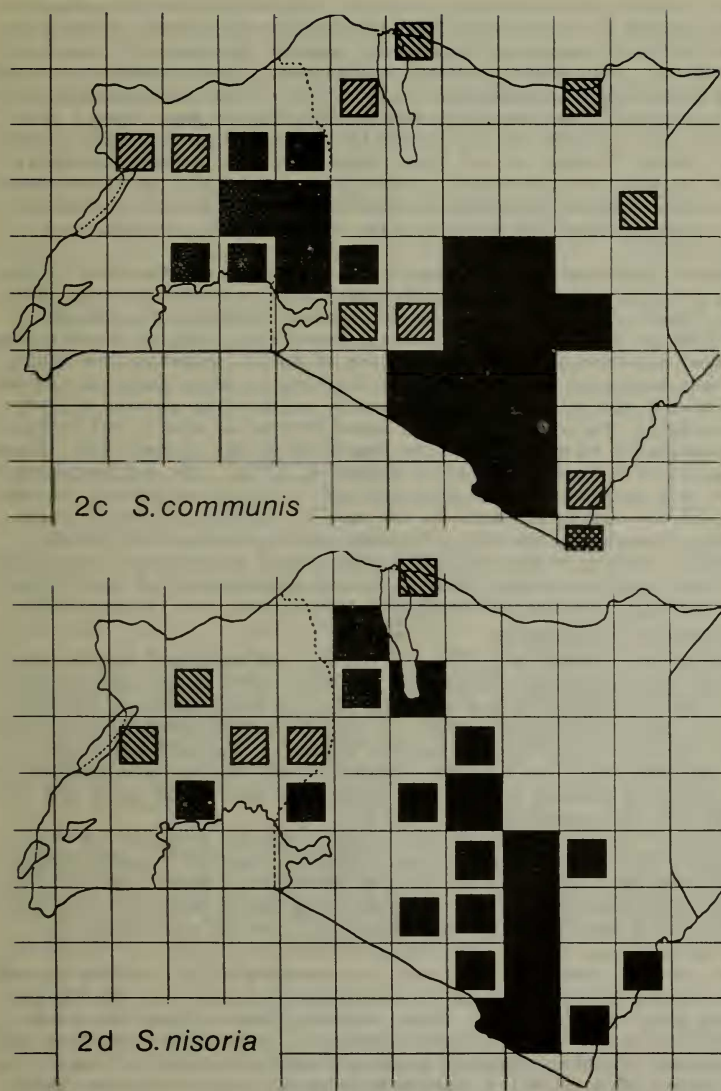


Fig. 2 Recorded distributions of the four *Sylvia* species in Kenya and Uganda. Large squares: reasonably widespread and not uncommon
Small squares: scarce, highly localized or known from less than five records



October, but the main influx is not until late October/mid-November. Maximum numbers are maintained during November/mid-December, after which passage birds have moved on. Ringing at Kampala (Pearson 1972) and Lake Amin (formerly Lake Edward) (M.P.L. Fogden pers. comm.) showed that some passage birds remained sedentary for weeks at a time. Heavy birds caught in early December (Pearson 1971, Moreau 1972, Fogden pers. comm.) were presumably about to embark on flights to southern Africa. A thin passage seems to occur through central Kenya during October to early December; however, further east, movement across Tsavo is later - during November to early January, and at Ngulia presumed passage birds are attracted to fruiting bushes after the rains as late as mid-January (Backhurst & Pearson 1977).

Wintering birds moult completely, starting during mid-December to mid-January and finishing during late February to late March (Pearson 1973). At this time birds show less tendency to flock together than during autumn, and in Uganda the diet contains less fruit. Song is heard increasingly from mid-February to the beginning of April, probably from birds which have completed moult. Increased flocking is often noted at the end of March, and wintering birds appear to be replaced by passage migrants early in April. The spring movement lasts throughout April, and birds are occasionally encountered at the beginning of May (latest 2nd). There is a record of a summering bird at Eldama on 2 July. The northward movement is less marked than the southward one in Uganda and Nyanza; on the other hand the spring movement is the more noticeable in central Kenya, and only in April are birds at all common in the Kenyan Rift Valley.

Most East African wintering and passage Garden Warblers are larger and greyer than European birds. There is reason to believe that practically all are derived from Russian *woodwardi* populations (see Pearson 1972).

WHITETHROAT *SYLVIA COMMUNIS*

The Whitethroat breeds in Europe (to 65° N.) and northwest Africa; Asia Minor and the eastern Mediterranean, and Asia north to western Siberia, east to northern Mongolia and south to the Caucasus, northern Iran and northern Afghanistan (Voous 1960). It winters in the northern tropics of Africa, and also south through eastern Africa to Rhodesia and South Africa (Moreau 1972). It winters in East Africa, but is more prominent in many areas as a passage migrant. It avoids the more humid areas and its distribution is somewhat patchy (Fig.2c).

In Uganda, the Whitethroat is practically limited to scrub and dry woodland in the east from Moroto south through Teso and Bukedi, ranging into western Kenya at Kongelai, Bungoma and Nyanza. Small numbers winter at Kampala/Entebbe and there are records from Lango (February) and the Kabalega Falls National Park (March-April). There is no evidence of appreciable passage through the Nile/Lake Victoria basin. In Kenya, the species winters commonly in dry bush and woodland at 700 to 1200 m, east of the central highlands, from Meru National Park south to the Nguni/Kakunike area (Garissa road), Kitui, Mutomo, Kibwezi, Tsavo West and Teita-Taveta. It frequents thicket and scrub, preferring localities with an abundance of undergrowth and creepers, and with green leaf remaining after the December rains. It ranges more locally west to Isiolo, Thika, Nairobi and Namanga, and east to Tsavo East and Garissa. The status of this species in northeastern Kenya remains to be clarified. There seem to be no winter records at present north of Garissa and Archer's Post. In dry northwestern Kenya, as in northernmost Uganda, it appears to be

absent in winter also. Passage is particularly marked in eastern Kenya, where a heavy autumn movement occurs through Tsavo, the Voi-Teita area and Kibwezi. In spring, passage occurs regularly around Nairobi, but despite evidence of large scale overflying (Britton & Britton 1977) relatively few birds are seen in the southeast. A few passage birds occur in both seasons at Lake Turkana, but apart from the occasional April record the species seems to be absent from southern parts of the Rift Valley.

The first Whitethroats usually reach Kenya during mid- to late October. Passage through Nairobi is restricted mainly to November, but the main movement across Tsavo continues heavily through December and, on a lesser scale, through January (Pearson & Backhurst 1976a,b, Backhurst & Pearson 1977). Large numbers of birds often remain in the eastern bush country until late in January; most of these subsequently move on. It is not clear whether such birds move far south, or whether they merely move locally into less arid areas as the bush dries and loses its leaf. Larger numbers certainly seem to remain in these open habitats in years with prolonged December/January rains than in dry winters. Many of the birds present during February and March are sedentary. Song may be heard at the end of December, but becomes more common during February and March. Birds depart from wintering sites at the end of March or the beginning of April. The Kenyan northward passage lasts mainly from the second to the fourth week of April, and birds are occasionally recorded early in May (latest 9th).

Vaurie (1959) recognized three races of the Whitethroat: the nominate race breeding from the Atlantic to the Black Sea, *volgensis* (larger and paler) east to western Siberia, and *icterops* (larger and greyer) south of the foregoing from the East Mediterranean to Mongolia. Stresemann & Stresemann (1966) pointed out that whereas *S. c. communis* undergoes wing moult on its European breeding grounds, the two eastern races moult in Africa. Most Kenyan and Ugandan winterers moult completely, typically between late January and late March; Kenyan autumn passage birds are mainly in worn plumage, and spring migrants very fresh. These birds are clearly of Asian origin. A few of the adults handled at Ngulia during November and January, grey individuals, are very freshly moulted; these are assumed to be *icterops* which have renewed their plumage whilst in transit in Ethiopia. Two adults with fresh primaries caught at Kampala in December were judged to have moulted on the breeding grounds; less grey than typical *icterops*, these were perhaps birds from eastern Europe or Asia Minor. Despite the statements by Williamson (1964) and the Stresemanns (*op. cit.*) there seems to be no other evidence that the nominate race reaches East Africa. The relative proportions of *icterops* and *volgensis* in wintering and passage populations remain to be clarified.

BARRED WARBLER *SYLVIA NISORIA*

From central and eastern Europe, the Barred Warbler ranges as a breeding bird through Russia (to about 55° N.) to western Siberia, and south to the Caucasus and the Tien Shan (Voous 1960). Its winter quarters seem to be restricted to northeast Africa south to Kenya, although Moreau (1972) speculated that it might extend west to Chad, presumably based on the single mid-October record of Dowsett (1969). The species is scarce in Uganda (Fig. 2d) where wintering has been recorded at Kampala/Entebbe; otherwise, November-December Kampala records, November records from Bukedi, Teso and Lake Mobutu (formerly Lake Albert), and late March

records from Bukedi and Teso perhaps all refer to passage birds.

In Kenya, the Barred Warbler is encountered quite widely on passage, and more locally as a wintering bird. Its distribution and habitat preferences are similar to, but by no means identical with those of the Whitethroat. East of the highlands it is locally common throughout winter in dry bush and woodland, typically at 600 to 1000m, from the neighbourhood of Nguni and Kakunike (Garissa road), south to Kitui, Kibwezi, Tsavo West, Voi and Teita-Taveta, ranging inland in small numbers to Machakos, Nairobi and Thika. In this part of Kenya it ranges rather further east than the Whitethroat into hotter, lower areas, but is the less common species nearer the highlands. It prefers sites with an abundance of thickets and undergrowth, but usually frequents higher cover than the Whitethroat. In northern Kenya it has been found wintering at Baringo, and commonly at Isiolo, along the Turkwell River to above Lodwar, near Ferguson's Gulf and at South Horr. In these areas it occurs in hot, arid and mainly leafless bush and woodland, typically along dry river beds, often inhabiting dense evergreen thickets. There appear to be no wintering records to date from northeastern Kenya, where it may occupy similar situations. Elsewhere, birds have been found wintering in Nyanza and on the Tana delta. Southward passage is noted mainly from the Tsavo and Voi areas, whilst spring movements have been most evident at Nairobi and Athi River.

Barred Warblers usually appear at the end of October or early in November. Migrants, presumably southward bound, are attracted to the Ngulia lights from late October to mid-January. Numbers inhabiting the bushland in Tsavo and around Voi are usually highest from late December to mid-January, when parties are attracted to crops of berries immediately after the rains. Like the Blackcap, the Barred Warbler undergoes only partial moult in Africa (Williamson 1964), but this involves not only the body feathers and wing coverts, but also the tail and, in some first year birds, the outer primaries. This moult is completed in Kenya between late December and February. Wintering birds are frequently heard in song in February and March, but most seem to depart by the first week of April. Passage influxes at Nairobi have occurred mainly during the first half of April, but there are records from later in the month, up to 28th.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank the following for records and help: G.C.Backhurst, P.L. & H.A. Britton, J.A.D.Cape, M.P.L.Fogden, G.R.Harrington, P.C.Lack, J.M.Lock, B.S.Meadows, J.G.Rolfe, J.Squire, D.A.Turner, R.J.Wheater, A.P.Zeigler, the British Museum (Nat.Hist.) and the National Museum, Nairobi.

REFERENCES

- BACKHURST, G.C. & PEARSON, D.J. 1977. Southward migration at Ngulia, Tsavo, Kenya 1976/77. *Scopus* 1: 12-17.
- BRITTON, P.L. & BRITTON, H.A. 1977. An April fall of Palaearctic migrants at Ngulia. *ibidem* 1: 109-111.
- DOWSETT, R.J. 1969. Barred Warbler *Sylvia nisoria* (Bechstein) at Lake Chad. *Bulletin of the British Ornithologists' Club* 89: 72-73.
- FRY, C.H., BRITTON, P.L. & HORNE, J.F.M. 1974. Lake Rudolf and the Palaearctic exodus from East Africa. *Ibis* 116: 44-51.
- HOPSON, A.J. & HOPSON, J. 1975. *Preliminary notes on the birds of the Lake Turkana area*. Kitale, cyclostyled.

- MANN, C.F. 1976. The birds of Teso District, Uganda. *Journal of the East Africa Natural History Society and National Museum* 156: 1-16.
 - PEARSON, D.J. 1971. Weights of some Palaearctic migrants in southern Uganda. *Ibis* 113: 173-184.
 - 1972. Wintering and migration of Palaearctic passerines at Kampala, southern Uganda. *ibidem* 114: 43-60.
 - 1973. Molt of some Palaearctic warblers wintering in Uganda. *Bird Study* 20: 24-36.
 - & BACKHURST, G.C. 1976a. The southward migration of Palaearctic birds over Ngulia, Kenya. *Ibis* 118: 78-105.
 - 1976b. Palaearctic passage migration at Kariobangi. *EAHNS Bulletin* 1976: 23-27.
 - ROLFE, J.G. & PEARSON, D.J. 1973. Some recent records of Palaearctic migrants from eastern Uganda. *ibidem* 1973: 62-66.
 - STRESEMANN, E. & STRESEMANN, V. 1968. Winterquartier und Mauser der Dorngrasmücke *Sylvia communis*. *Journal für Ornithologie* 109: 303-314.
 - VAURIE, C. 1959. *The birds of the Palearctic fauna, a systematic reference. Order Passeriformes*. London: Witherby.
 - VOOUS, K.H. 1960. *Atlas of European birds*. London: Nelson.
 - WILLIAMSON, K. 1964. *Identification for ringers 3. The genus Sylvia*. Oxford: British Trust for Ornithology.
 - ZINK, G. 1973. *Der Zug europäischer Singvögel* Vol. 1. Radolfzell: Vogelwarte Radolfzell.
- D.J. Pearson, Department of Biochemistry, University of Nairobi, Box 30197, Nairobi.

(Received 20 August 1978)